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Danger Warning

While President Reagan submits to the political requirement of his campaign and tries to avoid pre-election U.S.-Soviet confrontation, an internal paper drafted for CIA Director William Casey warns that the days ahead "will be the most dangerous that we have ever known."

The 11-page memorandum by the vice chairman of the CIA's National Intelligence Council was submitted to Casey in midsummer. Herbert E. Meyer, one of the few outsiders Casey brought to the CIA with him in 1981, told his boss that the Soviet Union faces a "growing sense of pessimism and looming decline."

That explains Meyer's warning. If the Soviet Union cannot reform its shackled managerial, agricultural and industrial systems because of fear of weakening the Communist Party's dictatorial control, it may choose a "high-risk course designed to change the correlation of [East-West] forces before it is too late." Such a course would be a "grab for the Persian Gulf, an attack on Western Europe or even a first strike on the U.S."

Disclaiming predictions, Meyer simply states as a fact that these "most dangerous" reactions to the Soviet "decline" may now have entered a stage of active consideration inside the Kremlin.

Some Soviet scholars believe that the Russian national temperament is not conducive to lashing out militarily in an effort to solve domestic problems, tending rather toward "circling the wagons." But Meyer's memorandum to Casey warns that the danger of the Soviets' striking at the United States and the West is real and rising. In plotting American strategy for dealing with the Soviet empire in its decline, the United States must make "absolutely certain" that no Soviet leadership could convince itself that salvation lies in trying to destroy the United States. That dictates military readiness.

Although Casey's response to Meyer's strategy for the period of Soviet "decline" was private, he is known to have reacted strongly in favor of Meyer's warning not to give the Soviets economic or technological help.

That exposes one of the most enduring and embittering disputes over U.S. strategy within the Reagan administration. At the moment Casey was studying Meyer's memorandum, the Commerce Department's Office of Export Administration was putting finishing touches on the largest new list of oil and gas equipment to be offered for sale to the Soviet Union since the early 1970s.

A U.S.-Soviet energy fair now being planned for Moscow next year will offer the Russians such mouth-watering American technology as new computers to guide the flow of natural gas in pipelines, submersible pumps and deep-sea exploration and extracting equipment.

Meyer warned explicitly against just such technology sales. Foreseeing Soviet requests for massive amounts of Western technology, Meyer said that the United States and its allies "have learned the hard way that the Soviets use whatever help we give not to improve their . . . standard of living but rather to build and deploy more weapons." In the end, he told Casey, the gains for Soviet military systems from such technology transfers always outweigh the profits of American producers.

This CIA portrait of a Soviet empire slipping into decline was buttressed by a stark collection of sociological and public health facts gathered by CIA analysts. Meyer said Soviet medical literature shows that five key communicable diseases are out of control in the Soviet Union: polio, diphtheria, scarlet fever, whooping cough and measles. The incidence of measles is only fractionally below the level at which it could be attributed to malnutrition. At least 12 cities, but not Moscow or Leningrad, are under food rationing today.

To support his finding of deep pessimism, Meyer said the Soviet abortion rate is running close to 70 percent (compared to the 26 percent U.S. rate). Demographics point to disaster: a declining population in the educated Russian Soviet Republic, which contains two-thirds of total Soviet industrial capacity, and high birthrates in the Moslem republics.

Two months before the election may not be the ripest time for Ronald Reagan to decide second-term strategy for dealing with his Soviet adversary, declining or not. But when he gets around to it, Reagan could do worse than ask his old friend Bill Casey to let him see Meyer's memorandum.